

Bardo Thodol

The ***Bardo Thodol*** (Tibetan: བར་དོ་ཐོས་གྲོལ, Wylie: *bar do thos grol*, "Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State") is a text from a larger corpus of teachings, the *Profound Dharma of Self-Liberation through the Intention of the Peaceful and Wrathful Ones*,^{[1][note 1]} revealed by Karma Lingpa (1326–1386). It is the best-known work of Nyingma literature,^[3] and is known in the West as the ***Tibetan Book of the Dead***

The Tibetan text describes, and is intended to guide one through, the experiences that the consciousness has after death, in the bardo, the interval between death and the next rebirth. The text also includes chapters on the signs of death and rituals to undertake when death is closing in or has taken place.



Manuscript of the *Bardo Thodol*.

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Tibetan name	
Tibetan	བར་དོ་ཐོས་གྲོལ
Transcriptions	
Wylie	bar do thos grol
THL	Bardo Tödröl
Lhasa IPA	[pʰàrdo tʰòdʑø]

Etymology

Bar do thos grol (Tibetan: བར་དོ་ཐོས་གྲོལ, Wylie: *bar do thos grol*) translates as:

- bar do*: "intermediate state", "transitional state", "in-between state", "liminal state" (which is synonymous with the Sanskrit *antarabhāva*). Valdez: "Used loosely the term "bardo" refers to the state of existence intermediate between two lives on earth."^[4] Valdez: "[The] concept arose soon after the Buddha's passing, with a number of earlier Buddhist groups accepting the existence of such an intermediate state, while other schools rejected ^[4]

- *thos grol*: "liberation", which is synonymous with the Sanskrit word *bodhi*, "awakening", "understanding", "enlightenment", and synonymous with the term *mirvana*, "blowing out", "extinction", "the extinction of illusion"^[5]

Original text

Origins and dating

According to Tibetan tradition, the *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State* was composed in the 8th century by Padmasambhava, written down by his primary student, Yeshe Tsogyal, buried in the Gampo hills in central Tibet and subsequently discovered by a Tibetan tertön, Karma Lingpa, in the 14th century.^{[6][7][8]}

bar do thos grol

The Tibetan title is *bar do thos grol*,^[9] *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State*.^[1] It consists of two comparatively long texts:^[1]

- "Great Liberation through Hearing: The Supplication of the Bardo of Dharmata" (*chos nyid bar do'i gsol 'debs thos grol chen mo*, the bardo of dharmata (including the bardo of dying);
- "Great Liberation through Hearing: The Supplication Pointing Out the Bardo of Existence" (*strid pa'i bar do ngo sprod gsol 'debs thos grol chen mo*), the bardo of existence.

Within the texts themselves, the two combined are referred to as *Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo*, *Great Liberation through Hearing*, or just *Liberation through Hearing*.^[note 2]

kar-gling zhi-khro

It is part of a larger terma cycle, *Profound Dharma of Self-Liberation through the Intention of the Peaceful and Wrathful Ones*,^[1] (*zab-chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol*, also known as *kar-gling zhi-khro*,^[2] popularly known as "Karma Lingpa's Peaceful and Wrathful Ones."^[1]

The *Profound Dharma of Self-Liberation* is known in several versions, containing varying numbers of sections and subsections, and arranged in different orders, ranging from around ten to thirty-eight titles.^[1] The individual texts cover a wide range of subjects, including meditation instructions, visualizations of deities, liturgies and prayers, lists of mantras, descriptions of the signs of death, indications of future rebirth, and texts such as the *bar do thos grol* that are concerned with the bardo-state.^[1]

Three bardos

The *Bardo Thodol* differentiates the intermediate state between lives into three bardos:

1. The *chikhai bardo* or "bardo of the moment of death", which features the experience of the clear light of reality, or at least the nearest approximation of which one is spiritually capable;
2. The *chonyid bardo* or "bardo of the experiencing of reality", which features the experience of visions of various Buddha forms, or the nearest approximations of which one is capable;
3. The *sidpa bardo* or "bardo of rebirth", which features karmically impelled hallucinations which eventually result in rebirth, typically yab-yum imagery of men and women passionately entwined.

The *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State* also mentions three other bardos:^[note 3]

1. "Life", or ordinary waking consciousness;
2. "Dhyana" (meditation);



Centuries old Zhi-Khro mandala, a part of the Bardo Thodol's collection, a text known in the West as The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which comprises part of a group of bardo teachings held in the Nyingma (Tibetan tradition) originated with guru Padmasambhava in the 8th Century.

3. "Dream", the dream state during normal sleep.

Together these "six bardos" form a classification of states of consciousness into six broad types. Any state of consciousness can form a type of "intermediate state", intermediate between other states of consciousness. Indeed, one can consider any momentary state of consciousness a bardo, since it lies between our past and future existences; it provides us with the opportunity to experience reality, which is always present but obscured by the projections and confusions that are due to our previous unskillful actions.

English translations

Evans-Wentz's *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*

The *bar do thos grol* is known in the west as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, a title popularized by Walter Evans-Wentz's edition,^{[9][10]} but as such virtually unknown in Tibet.^{[11][1]} *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was first published in 1927 by Oxford University Press. Dr. Walter Y. Evans-Wentz chose this title because of the parallels he found with the Egyptian Book of the Dead.^[12]

According to John Myrdhin Reynolds, Evans-Wentz's edition of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* introduced a number of misunderstandings about Dzogchen.^[13] In fact, Evans-Wentz' collected seven texts about visualization of the after-death experiences and he introduced this work collection as "The Tibetan Book of Death." Evans-Wentz was well acquainted with Theosophy and used this framework to interpret the translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which was largely provided by two Tibetan lamas who spoke English, Lama Sumdhon Paul and Lama Lobzang Mingnur Dorje.^[14] Evans-Wentz was not familiar with Tibetan Buddhism,^[13] and his view of Tibetan Buddhism was "fundamentally neither Tibetan nor Buddhist, but Theosophical and Vedantist."^[15] He introduced a terminology into the translation which was largely derived from Hinduism, as well as from his Theosophical beliefs.^[13] Contrary to the general belief spread in the West by Evans-Wentz, in Tibetan Buddhist practice the Tibetan Book of Dead is not read to the people who are passing away, but it is rather used during life by those who want to learn to visualize what will come after death.^[16]



Tibetan Thangka of Bardo. Vision of Serene Deities, 19th Century, Giumet Museum

C. G. Jung's psychological commentary first appeared in an English translation by R. F. C. Hull in the third revised and expanded Evans-Wentz edition of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.^[17] The commentary also appears in the Collected Works.^[18] Jung applied his extensive knowledge of eastern religion to craft a commentary specifically aimed at a western audience unfamiliar with eastern religious tradition in general and Tibetan Buddhism specifically.^[19] He does not attempt to directly correlate the content of the Bardo Thodol with rituals or dogma found in occidental religion, but rather highlights karmic phenomena described on the Bardo plane and shows how they parallel unconscious contents (both personal and collective) encountered in the west, particularly in the context of analytical psychology. Jung's comments should be taken strictly within the realm of psychology, and not that of theology or metaphysics. Indeed, he warns repeatedly of the dangers for western man in the wholesale adoption of eastern religious traditions such as yoga.^[20]

Other translations and summaries

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- Thurman, Robert(trans.) (1994)*The Tibetan Book of the Dead, as popularly known in the West; known in Tibet as "The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between"*, composed by Padma Sambhava discovered by Karma Lingpa; foreword by the Dalai Lama London: Harper Collins ISBN 1-85538-412-4
- Coleman, Graham, with Thupten Jinpa (eds.) (2005)*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*[English title]: *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States*[Tibetan title]; composed by Padma Sambhava revealed by Karma Lingpa; translated by Gyurme Dorje. London: Penguin Books ISBN 978-0-14-045529-8 (the first complete translation). Also: New York: Viking Penguin, NY, 2006. ISBN 0-670-85886-2 (hc); ISBN 978-0-14-310494-0 (pbk)
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Popular influence

The Psychedelic Experience

The Psychedelic Experience, published in 1964, is a guide for LSD-trips, written by Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner and Richard Alpert, loosely based on Evan-Wentz's translation of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.^{[21][22]} Aldous Huxley introduced the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* to Timothy Leary.^[22] According to Leary Metzner and Alpert, the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is

... a key to the innermost recesses of the human mind, and a guide for initiates, and for those who are seeking the spiritual path of liberation.^[23]

They construed the effect of LSD as a "stripping away" of ego-defenses, finding parallels between the stages of death and rebirth in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and the stages of psychological "death" and "rebirth" which Leary had identified during his research.^[24] According to Leary Metzner and Albert it is:

... one of the oldest and most universal practices for the initiate to go through the experience of death before he can be spiritually reborn. Symbolically he must die to his past, and to his old ego, before he can take his place in the new spiritual life into which he has been initiated.^[25]

Musical and cinematic works

- Finnish composer Erik Bergman composed a work titled Bardo Thödol in 1974 for a speaker, mezzo-soprano, baritone, mixed choir and orchestra; the text was based on a German translation of the Book of the Dead.^[26]
- "When I Was Done Dying", by American musician and composer Dan Deacon, is strongly inspired by the Bardo Thodol. The narrator's "story" begins at the very moment of his death, through multiple incarnations (a plant, a crab and, at the end, a human). The song, featured in an [adult swim] *OP* segment.
- The late 1960s band The Third Bardo took their name from the western title of this text.
- 1985 2-part documentary filmed in Ladakh and the States, first part entitled "The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Way of Life"; the second part "The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation" was a co-production between NHK (Japan), Mistral (France) and FBC (Canada). Narration in the English version is by Leonard Cohen. See links below
- Screenwriter and film producer Bruce Joel Rubin, who once lived in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, considered his film *Jacob's Ladder* a modern interpretation of the *Bardo Thodol*.^{[27][28]}
- In 2007, The History Channel released a documentary film *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.^{[web 1][note 4]}
- Country musician Sturgill Simpson's song "Just Let Go" from his 2014 album *Metamodern Sounds in Country Music* is about ego death and the transition between living and dying, and being reborn.
- In 1994, the Modern Rock band Live had a second album, *Throwing Copper* on which, track 9, a song titled "TB.D." (4:28) stands for *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.^[web 2]
- In 1996, Delerium Records released the *Liberation Thru' Hearing* CD which contains spoken/chanted readings from the Bardo Thodol set to music.^[web 3]
- *Enter the Void*, a 2009 French film written and directed by Gaspar Noé, is loosely based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.^[web 4]
- *The Beatles* song *Tomorrow Never Knows* contains lyrics inspired by The Tibetan Book of the Dead.^[29]

- Electronic group Demdike Stare released an album in 2010, *Liberation Through Hearing* featuring a track titled "Bardo Thodol".

See also

- Bardo
- Ego death
- Index of Buddhism-related articles
- Secular Buddhism
- Six realms
- Reality in Buddhism
- Tibetan Buddhism

Notes

1. *zab-chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol* also known as *skar-gling zhi-khro*^[2]
2. In Tibetan, *bar do thos grol*, *thos grol chen mo*, and *thos grol*
3. See also Trikaya, Kosha and Three Bodies Doctrine (Védanta)
4. "The *Tibetan book of the Dead* is an important document that has stood the test of time and attempts to provide answers to one of mankind's greatest questions: What happens when we die? Interviews with Tibetan Lamas, American scholars, and practicing Buddhists bring this powerful and mysterious text to life. State-of-the-art computer-generated graphics will recreate this mysterious and exotic world. Follow the dramatized journey of a soul from death...to re-birth. In Tibet, the "art of dying" is nothing less than the art of living.^[web 1]

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2. Norbu 1989, p. ix.
3. Coleman 2005
4. Valdez 2014, p. 166, note 122.
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6. Evans-Wentz 1960, p. liv.
7. Fremantle, Fremantle & Trungpa 2003, p. xi.
8. Forbes & Henley 2013
9. Norbu 1989, p. xii.
10. Reynolds 1989, p. 71-115.
11. Lopez 2011, p. 127.
12. Evans-Wentz 1960.
13. Reynolds 1989, p. 71.
14. Reynolds 1989, p. 72–73, 78.
15. Reynolds 1989, p. 78.
16. Paul van der Velde
17. Evans-Wentz ed. 1965
18. Jung 1977.
19. Coward 1985
20. Coward 1985, p. 79-92.
21. Merkur 2014, p. 221.
22. Gould 2007, p. 218.
23. Leary, Metzner & Alpert 1964, p. 11.

24. [Gould 2007](#), p. 218-219.
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External links

- [History article](#)
- [Bardo Thodol – The Tibetan Book of the Dead](#)– Public Domain PDF ebook
- [The Tibetan Book of the Dead: A Way of Life](#) – First part of a documentary filmed in Ladakh by NHK, Mistral and CFB
- [The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation](#)– Second part of a documentary filmed in Ladakh by NHK, Mistral and CFB
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